

Making the good better

Parish Reviews are an effective tool in encouraging clergy and congregations make sense of change and respond proactively to the challenges faced by parish churches today.

Richard Fox, Partner of The Learning Corporation LLP, Guildford and Canon Mavis Wilson, now Rector of Frimley in Surrey, but formerly Director of Mission, Evangelism and Parish Development in the Diocese of Guildford describe how they work and what the benefits are.

A Parish Review offers a structured process to enable the Incumbent and a team of people representing a cross section of the congregation to work together to:

- appraise, prayerfully, honestly and non judgementally, the Church's current shape of ministry,
- identify strengths and weaknesses,
- detect God's vision for the parish, and set achievable goals for the future within a stated time frame,
- work out how those goals are going to be implemented and a system for reviewing progress,
- establish how the Church family is going to be kept informed. For the most important thing about bringing about change is making sure everybody knows why changes are being proposed and where they as individuals will fit in.

Many of the diagnostic tools and exercises used have been drawn from business management and secular leadership training. The criticism of using these or similar processes in the life of the Church has often been that the tools of leadership do not suit the Church, which is a

curious mixture of amateur and professional, voluntary and stipendiary, practical and spiritual.

Care must always be taken in using the tools of one discipline in the service of another, but often the gods of management have derived from the principles of faith. Can it really be argued that Moses, Joshua, St Paul, even Jesus, were devoid either of vision or strategic thinking?

One church in the diocese had committed and effective leadership for a long time, resulting in growth and outreach. The vision for making better links with the community was being realised through the building of a large parish centre for church and community use. Yet the arrival of a new incumbent inevitably raised new expectations and a shared desire to discover a renewed purpose and vision.

All that was good deserved affirmation, yet there was a strong sense that things could be even better. But how?

The church contacted the Diocesan Department for MEPD who arranged for a Parish Review. A member of the department joined up with a lay volunteer who was a freelance management advisor and facilitator, together they acted as joint facilitators to a group drawn from the parish.

The members represented the main interest groups and types of people within the congregation, including some on the very fringes of the Church's life.

Their role was to contribute to the process, communicate progress to the congregation and to model the changes to be implemented.

It is important that the incumbent welcomes the Parish Review and can take part in a positive, non defensive way. The views, hopes and feelings of the incumbent about their ministry situation constitute crucial pieces of information. The facilitators will take some time at

the outset listening to the incumbent's experiences, anxieties and pressures. They will carry out a similar exercise with members of the Review Group, to get a rounded picture and this will later form part of the report which will be given to the Review Group to work with.

Parish Review is not merely an administrative exercise, so from the launch service onwards, prayer within the Review Group and in the Church as a whole is an important focus. Openness to God, to one another and to the local community are key criteria in effective analysis and mission.

From among a number of potential diagnostic processes, the one most appropriate and manageable must be selected. Among those available are the Natural Church Development material, Robert Warren's work on Healthy Congregations and the Parish Development Profile available in the diocese.

In this case the Review Group decided to look at the different areas of parish life outlined in the Parish Review Guidelines including worship, ministry to young people, mission and outreach .

Two people were tasked to work on each topic. They were given a list of useful starter questions but were then able to choose their own methods of research.

The primary aim was to involve as many people as possible in the process, access a wide spectrum of opinions and to capture people's feelings. The result was many conversations, some questionnaires and several group discussions.

People beyond the fringes of the church were the most difficult to contact. It was invaluable having a member of the group who was able to speak as a semi outsider.

As the data became available it was presented to the whole Review Group, which met regularly. It made its own analysis and added further evidence and reflections.

All the data gathering was focussed around the idea of the Purpose Tree which enables an organisation to clarify its Mission (the reason for which it exists), its Vision (where the review Group detects that God would love to see His parish by a particular date), its Strategies (the outline plans through which change will actually happen) and its Roles, Goals and Tactics (the organisational framework and actions needed to implement the strategies and achieve the vision).

All growth and development occurs by bridging the gap between current reality and future hopes. How could the group articulate the future for this parish?

Important theological questions were raised. People were excited and challenged as they explored issues with which they had not seriously struggled before e.g.

- What is the real purpose of our Church?
- How can the natural spirituality of people be valued and influenced for Christ?
- What is worship for?

Then came the cultural considerations. What do young people value and enjoy? Why don't people come to Church every Sunday any more?

Gifts of imagination, discernment and courage were needed as the spectre of possible change was raised.

The Group wrote brief vision statements for each of the seven segments of the vision.

The Youth vision statement is an example of what this church wanted to see within three years:

We value our youth and younger church members. We seek to nurture them in their understanding and faith. We encourage and use their skills and gifts in our worship and church activities – the energy of youth combined with the wisdom of age. We strive to provide a fully resourced, well supported and enthusiastic youth ministry team.

Once a vision is articulated the key question becomes 'Why aren't you doing these things already?'

The group was asked to identify the barriers that were firmly in place thwarting the realisation of the vision. It was then asked: 'What beliefs and values sustain these barriers and keep them in place?'

The Group wrestled with this and discovered painful and helpful truths:

- Christian parents really struggle to guide their children into faith.
- People are too busy for relationships especially with young people.
- The age profile of the Church does not lend itself to finding youth leaders.
- There is no method of identifying the gifts, which might exist among the congregation.
- Training is not taken seriously.
- We do not want to make space in our worship for young people.
- Where youth ministry is being done it is not communicated to the wider church family to engage their interest, support and prayer.

The responses to the question 'How would a proactive church tackle these barriers and sustainers' produced good and creative ideas for positive ways forward.

These were listed as action points and later prioritised and working dates for implementation were added

Throughout the process the Review Group was asked when and how it would communicate progress to the rest of the Church.

A particularly important event was the evening when the vision and outline plans were presented and the attendees were invited to volunteer to help implement the plans. An encouraging number of people came forward.

The question always asked is 'Did anything valuable happen in the long term?'

We think it did. The Rector commented: "One of the principal benefits of the review has been the way in which the Church's ministry is now increasingly 'handed over' to the Church itself. A much wider cross-section of the membership is involved in leading, overseeing and directing all we do, while at the same time not losing an overall focus. Many people, quite apart from me, have been challenged into a new vision of how we can do things and what our purpose is as a church in this parish.

"The Review asked us some very awkward questions, and implementing the recommendations has not always been a comfortable process – but this is precisely its value, because it has forced us to take seriously the issues we might otherwise have glossed over.

"We are now at the stage where large chunks have been implemented, and the church membership is definitely moved on in maturity, has engaged more with developing its spiritual life, and is more outward-looking. But we all recognise that there is still much to do."

The Chair of the Review Group said: "The review really helped us to focus on what the Church is all about, turning us from looking inwards to the more progressive stage of looking outwards towards the community."

Clearly a Parish Review will initiate a period of discovery, learning and change and this is another challenge to the leadership. However,

since this review was undertaken and owned by the laity who also presented the findings to the rest of the congregation the leadership is likely to find itself better supported and understood. A more truly shared ministry should result and be sustainable.

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